

A Brief History of American Police Brutality

There are riots and protests in every major city in the United States. Two Black Americans, George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, were brutally murdered by police in three months. Their stories are only episodes in a horrifying yet complex history of police brutality--a history of violence, reform, riots, and militarization. While the mainstream media presents police brutality as isolated incidents, the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd do not exist in a vacuum--they are a continuation of this history. This timeline attempts to show that: (a) Police brutality is a human rights abuse that has drawn the attention of international organizations including the United Nations and Amnesty International. The prevalence of police brutality means that the United States is an authoritarian society; (b) Police are becoming increasingly militarized. As police departments turn into municipal armed forces, police violence becomes more frequent; (c) Police departments are a continuation of slave patrols; And (d) local reforms and organized activism (including riots) are the most effective means of curtailing police abuse. The federal government and self-regulated police will only further militarize policing.

Militarization of police

1704 South Carolina establishes the first **slave patrols** in areas where Black slaves outnumber Whites. Slave patrols are considered by many contemporary scholars and activists to be forerunners of contemporary police departments.

1865 Robber Baron Jay Gould brags that he could get one half of the working class (the police) to kill the other (his own workers). He said this at the height of the Progressive Era, when **police violently dispersed strikes**.

1886 President Richard Nixon introduces the term "**War on Drugs**."

1968 Supreme Court makes it **harder to take legal action** in cases of police brutality in its ruling for **Rizzo v Goode**.

1973 Ronald Reagan sworn in as president.

1976 President Reagan uses the "**War on Drugs**" to escalate law enforcement.

1979 Supreme Court rules that **choke holds are constitutional** with **City of Los Angeles v Lyons**.

1982 The **police union organized racially charged demonstrations against Mayor Dinkins**. Mayoral candidate Rudy Giuliani supports the protests and blames Dinkins for low morale in the police force.

1983 US Army begins to train **police departments in urban warfare**.

1989 Mayor Giuliani reforms the NYPD with the **Zero Tolerance** policy to further separate the police from other social services, and to further enlarge the police force. While Zero Tolerance did successfully reduce crime in the city, it **propagated the militarization of the NYPD**.

1993 When **v US** allows officers to make "**pretext stops**," meaning they may stop and frisk suspects under the pretext of a smaller offense, even if they intend to pursue a more serious offense.

2000 5 million New Yorkers stopped and frisked. 82-90% had not committed an offense, and only 9-12% were White. Because stop and frisks were relentless and mostly without cause, the practice was a form of **psychological violence**.

2014 FBI director James Comey says that "Americans actually have no idea" about how frequent police violence is because of **inadequate data collection**.

2016 Donald Trump sworn in as President.

2017 Trump administration stalls US DOJ plans to quantitatively **track police violence**.

1865 **Black codes** in Mississippi and South Carolina **replace slave patrols with police departments**. When former slaves committed petty offenses, they were treated as serious crimes.

1886 Supreme Court case **Terry v Ohio** increases the scope of police intervention in civilian life. **Police may now arrest based on "reasonable suspicion"**--a much lower standard than "probable cause."

1973 Supreme Court rules in **Lewis v City of New Orleans** that it is **illegal to curse at a police officer**, and in many cases to even criticize a police officer.

1981 Against the Posse Comitatus Act (see 1878), police departments were given access to military equipment and training by the Armed Forces, as part of the War on Drugs.

1989 Supreme Court rules in **Graham v Connor** that **police may use deadly force with the standard of "objective reasonableness"**. This court case is used to justify **fatal on-duty shootings by police officers** to this day. However, police are held liable under the Constitution for use of excessive force.

1992 The US Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) **stopped collecting data on murders committed by on-duty police officers** because many police departments don't keep statistics on homicides committed by their officers or simply declined to participate in the BJS survey.

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Attempts at reform

1878 **Posse Comitatus Act** makes it a felony for the military to perform law enforcement duties in an attempt to clarify the duties of the Armed Forces and those of police departments.

1895 **Curran Commission** investigates violence and corruption within the NYPD.

1913 A **riot in Harlem** results in Mayor Fiorello La Guardia forming a commission to understand police brutality. The commission **criticizes the over-policing of Harlem**.

1929 Supreme Court **bans police from using physical coercion** in **Brown v Mississippi**.

1936 Brooklyn branch of the **NAACP focuses its attention on police brutality** after counting nine assaults committed by police against Blacks between May and July.

1943 Rumors that a police officer killed a Black woman in Harlem result in **public hearings on police brutality** and an advisory committee to investigate **police brutality complaints in Harlem**.

1945 Civil Rights Congress (a non-governmental civil rights organization) **petitions the UN with We Charge Genocide**, which documents thousands of racially charged incidents of police violence.

1948 Another **civilian review board was proposed in the New York City Council** because the police were incapable of regulating themselves. **The attempt was unsuccessful**.

1951 **Riots in Newark** after police officers beat black cab driver John Smith. The four days of riot resulted in twenty-six deaths and numerous injuries.

1954 President **Lyndon Baines Johnson** starts the **Kerner Commission** to investigate the causes of the riots of the 1960s. The Commission found that **Black Americans propagated their political agendas most efficiently during riots and times of political unrest**.

1964 **Riots in Miami**. Police break into the home of a Black school teacher during a drug raid at the wrong house. The Miami Herald found that on average, three brutality complaints were **filed against police each week**.

1965 US Commission on Civil Rights documents Houston and Philadelphia police, finding that **complaints of police brutality are usually ignored within police bureaucracies**.

1967 **David Dinkins**, the first **Black Mayor of New York**, establishes a program of community policing called "**Safe Streets, Safe City**."

1968 The program also diversified the police force and even after-school centers. **Crime rates dropped within a year**.

1973 Mayor **Dinkins appoints the Mollen Commission** to investigate allegations of police brutality and other crimes within the NYPD.

1981 **LAPD appoints an African American chief (Willie Williams)** who promised to improve relationships between police and the Black community. 1995 polls find that two thirds of Los Angeles residents approved his reforms--including 80% of African Americans.

1985 President **Bill Clinton** enacts the **Violence Control and Law Enforcement Act** to increase federal aid to local and state police departments. The act also gives the **Justice Department more investigative and prosecutorial authority over instances of police violence**, and that the department must collect statistics on police brutality.

1991 After numerous high-profile hearings, **Mollen Commission releases a highly critical report on police misconduct in New York**. Their conclusion is the opposite of the Knapp Commission (1973): most officers are meat-eaters.

1992 **Justice Department launches a "Pattern of Abuse" probe in the Miami police department** because of repeated incidents of police brutality. The 2013 report shows that the department committed a number of racially charged shootings.

1993 **Attorney General Loretta Lynch** begins an investigation of the **Chicago police department** after the perceived cover-up of the fatal shooting of a Black teenager.

Incidents of police brutality

1878 **Lexow Commission** investigates **Clubber Williams**, a captain of a precinct in New York, who retired with a suspiciously exorbitant net worth.

1895 **Elbert Dukes**, a nine year old, struck in the face by a police officer in **New York**.

1913 **Ben Fields**, a **Harlem** resident, shot by a police officer who saw Fields with a large sum of money which he then took. The officer then punched Fields, slammed him against a wall, and shot him in the stomach. Fields was **paralyzed for the rest of his life**.

1929 **Police assault protesters** marching from **Selma to Montgomery**.

1935 **New Orleans police** (with the assistance of two officers from San Francisco) **torture the San Francisco 8**, a group of **Black Panthers** who allegedly killed a police officer in San Francisco. Their **confessions were dismissed** by a judge in 1974 because of the torture.

1936 **Clifford Glover**, a 10-year-old African American boy, was shot by an undercover policeman.

1943 **Tyisha Miller**, a 19-year-old Black woman, was shot and killed by policemen.

1945 **Rodney King** brutally attacked by **Los Angeles** police. Despite the beating being videotaped, the officers involved were acquitted. Riots ensued across Los Angeles. African American approval of the police dropped from 64% in 1988 to 14%.

1948 **Malcolm Green** beaten to death by the **Detroit Police Department**.

1951 **Alicia Sotero Vasquez and Enrique Funes Flores** beat by police in **Los Angeles** after a freeway chase. Incident videotape.

1954 **Abner Louima** beaten and sodomized with a police stick by a NYPD officer. He subsequently spent three months in the hospital. The beating resulted in street protests, a federal investigation, and lengthy prison sentences for two of the officers involved.

1964 **Patrick Dorismond** shot and killed by an undercover narcotics officer in **New York**. The officer attempted to buy drugs from Dorismond who refused. A backup officer shot and killed Dorismond.

1965 **Suffolk County** police force **Latina women** to perform sexual acts and strip at traffic stops. In one case, a woman was forced to walk home in only her underwear.

1967 **Chicago police sodomize Freddie Mason**, a gay Black man, with a broomstick.

1973 **Santiago "Chago" Villanueva** killed by police during an epileptic episode.

1981 **Cau Bich Tran**, a 25 year old Vietnamese woman, shot by **San Jose** police in her own home after they mistook her vegetable peeler for a weapon.

1985 **Michael Pleasence**, 23, shot in the head by a **Chicago** police officer. The officer was suspended for 30 days and then promoted.

1989 **Miami police taser a Latino first-grader**. A week later, they taser a 12 year old girl.

1991 **Gus Rugley**, 21, shot 39 times by **San Francisco** police a high speed chase.

1992 **Chicago police sodomize Copez Coffie**, 23, with a screwdriver.

1993 An **LAPD officer sexually batters an undocumented Latina woman** after she reported a domestic abuse incident. The officer was convicted.

1994 **Jonie Pratt**, a Black schoolteacher, beat by **New Orleans** police officers during a traffic stop.

1998 **A Minneapolis** police officer beat a Haitian man saying "**We Rodney Kinged you**."

1999 **Lillian Fletcher**, 62, tasered by **Chicago** police officers who forced their way into her home.

2000 **Michael Brown** shot by police in **Ferguson, Missouri** brings national attention to police violence. **Black Lives Matter**, founded in 2013, becomes larger and more active.

2001 **Eric Garner** held in a chokehold by police officers in **Staten Island**. The videotaped incident draws more attention to police brutality.

2002 **Freddie Gray** killed by police in **Baltimore**.

2003 **12-year-old Tamir Rice** shot by police in **Cleveland** who believed his toy gun was real.

2004 **Alton Sterling (Baton Rouge)** and **Philando Castile (Minnesota)** shot by police in two separate incidents in a period of two days.

2005 **Chicago police officer Rex Hayes** amasses over 65 **misconduct complaints since 1979**. He cracked open a man's skull causing permanent brain damage, broke a woman's arm, and committed several other beatings.

2006 **Amadou Diallo**, 23, shot and killed by four plainclothes **New York** policemen who claimed he was reaching for a gun. He was actually reaching for his wallet. The murder resulted in protests at police headquarters, but the four officers involved were acquitted. 89% of Blacks, 61% of Whites, and 81% of Latinos believed that there was "absolutely no excuse" to kill Diallo. Furthermore, 73% of Blacks, 51% of Whites, and 60% of Hispanics believed the NYPD should hire more minority officers.

2007 **LAPD officers rape a Native American trans woman**.

2008 **Diane Bond**, 50, threatened by **Chicago** police in her own public housing unit who point a loaded gun to her head. They then force her to strip and destroy her belongings. Two weeks later, they wait outside her apartment, force her to undress and expose her genitalia to the officers, and threaten to remove her teeth if she refuses. None of the officers were arrested.

2009 **NYPD officers force a 35 year old Latina woman** to perform oral sex on them in her apartment, with her three children sleeping nearby.

2010 **Henry Glover** shot by **New Orleans** policeman.

2011 **Sean Bell**, 23, shot fifty times by the **NYPD**.

2012 **Oscar Grant** shot by police in **Oakland**.

2013 **Breonna Taylor** shot in her own home by police in **Louisville, Kentucky**.

2014 **Minneapolis resident George Floyd** killed by a police officer who knelt on his neck for nine minutes. Despite Covid-19 and quarantine, protests ensue across the country. Heavily armed police officers (and in Washington DC, the Armed Forces) escalate peaceful protests. Most major cities issue a curfew to discourage protests.

1955 **Miles Davis**, the internationally famous jazz musician, was attacked by police in **New York** after escorting a blonde woman into a taxi.

1959 **Police dogs** attack Black teenagers during **Martin Luther King Jr.'s peaceful protest in Birmingham, Alabama**.

1963 **Eulia Love** shot by **Los Angeles** police after allegedly threatening officers with a knife.

1965 **Edmund Perry**, a 17-year-old black honors student, was killed by a plainclothes policeman.

1968 **Chicago police officer Jon Burge** fired by Chicago police force. Since joining the force in 1972, he **tortured over a hundred African Americans**. He frequently used the n-word, threatened defendants with physical violence, and told Black torturers that nobody would believe them because of their race. Despite the torture, many defendants who were tortured for a confession remained in prison after his suspension.

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